

'India's biggest bottleneck is its bureaucracy'

- [Nidhi Adlakha](#)



Special Arrangement
Karuna Gopal

Karuna Gopal, an advisor to India's ambitious 100 Smart Cities Mission and President, Foundation for Futuristic Cities tells us why the country needs a people-centric approach to urban planning

Karuna Gopal has contributed to the design of the proposed smart cities across India. Her expertise lies in adapting international best practices to Indian contexts. The Foundation for Futuristic Cities is a think-tank that has influenced urban transformation in India for over a decade.

Excerpts from an interview on the sidelines of the recent International Green Building Conference in Singapore:

Why does India need smart cities?

South-East Asian countries are getting increasingly urbanised and the West is witnessing a reverse phenomenon with people leaving cities and moving to the outskirts. Adjusting to this urbanisation trend is a challenge and each country has coped differently. Different terminologies have been used such as eco-cities, sustainable cities, and digital cities. India's answer to this urbanisation is the Smart Cities Mission.

What hurdles do you face while working on the 100 Smart Cities Mission?

There are many misconceptions about smart cities; too many myths. It's important to demystify the concept and this is the biggest challenge. Educating people that smart cities are green cities is important. One of the biggest myths is that they are all about technology. But the fact is, technology is a mere enabler. It is all about using technology in a sustainable manner. Technological interventions go a long way in preventing environmental degradation, reducing CO2 emissions, etc.

People also tend to believe that these cities are investment-heavy. It is not about large investments but about innovative financing. Smart cities are for the people and all the plans encourage inclusivity.

How is India's Mission different from other countries?

The challenge was how to customise the plan for the Indian context to make it India-centric. Apart from China, stakeholder considerations are taken for granted in most countries, and I wanted to change that. Citizen engagement for 'co-creation' is crucial and this was one of the key points of the Mission.

On what basis were cities shortlisted?

Each city has its own DNA. We shortlisted cities based on various criteria — percentage of projects completed under the Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission (JNNURM), the city's administrative efficiency, vision and strategy, implementation plan, an evaluation of the city's Smart City Proposal (SCP). We were looking for fresh and innovative ideas that included city-centric initiatives such as plans to revive their heritage.

On what parameters did Chennai score?

Chennai has done many things that other cities haven't. The water supply management in the city has improved and its rain water harvesting mission is a model project. The city has been successful in attracting a number of industries. Tamil Nadu comes a close second (after Gujarat) in achieving Swachh Bharat Goals and the community toilet project is a success.

Such plans look good on paper. Where are we going wrong in implementation?

We have not planned any of our cities in the last 70 years. Unfortunately, city planning and urban design comes as an after-thought. The biggest bottleneck is the bureaucracy, which does not encourage innovation or citizen participation. This is why India can't be compared to other countries and we need to accept that such projects are tough to implement. It is a complex process and execution is a challenge we face. While we aren't a rich country, human capital is our biggest asset and we need to build on this. A 'mission program' like the Smart City Mission has to be implemented in 'mission' mode and a 'business as usual' approach will not work.

What do our cities need to work on?

Each city should have a group of advisors and this will help the systematic implementation of projects. The plan for each smart city needs to be integrated with our sustainability goals. Government ministries need to work in tandem. For example, the urban development ministry needs to work with the environment ministry which, in turn, needs to work with the power ministry. We are working on these parameters and developing a framework for an inter-ministerial task force.

What is the 'Sculpt your City' initiative?

In 2009, we launched 'Citizens for City', a contest where more than 100 organisations participated and scientists, IT professionals, business leaders, professors, and school students stepped in to contribute strategies to make Hyderabad a world-class city. The output was 'Sculpt your City' — a case study and guidance document on co-creation and innovation to make cities more liveable. A compilation of 21 strategies demonstrated that citizens are willing to stop playing critics and partner with the government. This process can be scaled up and replicated across India.

Explain the 'Corporates for Cities' initiative.

Business can't succeed if cities fail and this was the basic idea behind the initiative. The sustainability of cities and business are inextricably linked. Companies need cities to provide them with reliable infrastructure, an educated workforce, and a secure environment to work in. Cities, on the other hand, require business as an economic driver. We propose the setting up of a corporate sector advisory in each city. This is a voluntary affiliation of business entities with Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) programmes, to make the city competitive, liveable, and sustainable.

Can you give us a checklist for Chennai to achieve its smart city goals?

The city needs to work on three broad parameters. First, traffic congestion — although the city boasts of constructing 21 flyovers, no efforts have been taken to reduce vehicular traffic. Chennai needs to encourage public transport and integrate it with cycle tracks and pedestrian infrastructure. The 'Work From Home' concept needs to be introduced. Second, mixed land-use will go a long way in increasing the city's green cover. As per the Master Plan 2021, 30 per cent green cover is mandatory. And lastly, Chennai needs to increase its focus on renewable energy by tapping into solar power. Deploying technology to sense natural disasters is crucial to be prepared for calamities like the floods that hit the city last year.

Chennai needs to look into the preservation of its coast and develop a 'Blue Economy' that is part of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals. A Blue Economy does not look at oceans as a means of free resource extraction and an unlimited sink for waste disposal. It shifts focus to an economy where benefits are shared more equitably.

Where do you see India in the next 10 years?

India has a long way to go but I am optimistic. The country has demonstrated splinter skills and leapfrogged in telecom penetration and technology absorption. We are learning from the mistakes other countries have made and we have an advantage over most countries in terms of our project timeline... we are planning for smart cities when we are just 35 per cent urbanised whereas the West planned for them after they reached 80 per cent urbanisation.

In the next six months, however, people will witness how difficult it is to implement the Mission. Currently, we are drafting proposals and the project is in the initial stages. Once investments start pouring in, the process will get more complicated. But I am hopeful that it will be a success, putting India on a path to progress.

